



# Leading contact centre teams through change

Spring 2021

A CCMA Research Initiative

Supporting Partner

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## How change impacts colleagues on the frontline

For people working in contact centres, change is constant. Most recently the pandemic has redefined contact centre operations and the lives of colleagues, most of whom have been working remotely.

To explore how contact centres are managing through this tumultuous period and how change is affecting colleagues on the front line, the CCMA conducted a research study comprising two phases, with the support of RingCentral.

The first stage consisted of one-on-one interviews with

10 frontline team managers from contact centres, some larger, some smaller, encompassing a variety of sectors. Conducted in strict anonymity, these interviews captured the experiences of people on the ground.

The findings from these interviews were subsequently shared and debated in focus groups with 11 contact centre leaders, again covering a broad mix of industries and contact centre types.

## With thanks to

The CCMA and RingCentral extend their sincere thanks to all contributors for their generous participation in the study.

**Amy Anderson**, Contact Centre Manager,  
Echo Managed Services

**Helen Beeson**, Customer Contact Manager,  
Norwich City Council

**Marco Brunetti**, Contact Centre Performance  
Manager, Hoist Finance

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**Rachelle Elliott**, Call Centre Manager,  
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**Colette Evans**, Head of Customer Service,  
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**Nikki Lidster**, SME Operations Manager,  
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**Dale Murphy**, Player Support Operations Manager,  
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**Mark Porter**, Head of Contact Services,  
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**Michael Rowland**, Contact Centre Manager,  
AXA Global Healthcare

**Charlotte Solberger**, Director Telephone Operations,  
Ipsos MORI

**Shaun Taylor**, Customer Lead,  
Place at One Manchester

...plus the many frontline colleagues who were interviewed anonymously.

## Foreword

Contact centres have become accustomed to a rapid pace of change thanks to technological advancements, but the past 12 months have been on a new level altogether.

We wanted to understand in depth the types of changes people have experienced during this extraordinary period, how it impacts their lives and their ability to serve customers. We also sought to uncover the process of change in contact centres: how does it come about and what are the things to be aware of when orchestrating change?

The result is this report. I think it's one of the most comprehensive studies of life on the ground in contact centres ever published. I'm sure you will find things that you recognise from your own working environment, as well as helpful advice to support you and your teams to navigate your ongoing journey as you seek to improve the experiences of colleagues and customers alike.



**Leigh Hopwood,**  
CEO, CCMA

This research from CCMA is a must-read for contact centre leaders. As CCMA conducted its investigation at the intersection of rising customer expectations and a global pandemic, the findings are doubly relevant. Overlooked issues have truly come to the fore in these conversations.

The value of connection between the contact centre and the rest of the business comes into stark contrast, along with the challenge to agents' wellbeing. The gaps in technology, training and staffing are also apparent, indicating an opportunity for improvement.

The first step is awareness. Through these conversations, we've become much more aware

of the difficulties faced by contact centre staff. The next step is for businesses to investigate solutions that will give agents the support and tools they need.

With CX a key brand differentiator this year, the findings in this report will be valuable in informing your contact centre strategy through the advent of hybrid work and beyond.



**Steven Rafferty,**  
UK Country Manager,  
RingCentral

## A perfect storm

***“A lot of my job will be dealing with change, I think, more than anything else.”***

Frontline manager, consumer goods

In the past 12 months sweeping changes have taken hold in the contact centre industry. Customer

demands have suddenly escalated at the same time as efficiency has been challenged by the inevitable constraints of operating under lockdown. The combination of these two effects happening side by side created a perfect storm, the impact of which will be felt long after lockdown is over.

## Customer expectations have evolved

Health and medical workers excepted, no-one has felt the uncertainty and turmoil of COVID-19 more than contact centre colleagues.

Many organisations saw a sudden rush of demand as the first lockdown was announced. One year later demand is, for many, still above pre-pandemic levels, as anxious customers continue to turn to contact centres for reassurance.

Since the pandemic, customer queries have become more complex, more sensitive and take longer to resolve. Contact centres accustomed to dealing with relatively straightforward queries are now handling more elaborate conversations, such as customers enquiring about bigger-than-usual utility bills, delayed deliveries or issues regarding vulnerability as economic hardship has increased during the pandemic.

***“Customers now have far more questions. [The pandemic has] heightened the need to understand finances. Inbound call volumes and average handling time have gone up and not eased off.”***

Frontline manager, financial services

***“We receive very emotive contact around high bills, where ordinarily we would visit that customer to carry out some consumption checks and so on. At the moment, during a lockdown, that’s not always possible. There are other things we are***

***doing and we’re not just leaving that customer there. But that’s been a real area of challenge for us.”***

Amy Anderson, Contact Centre Manager, Echo Managed Services

***“We set up a Norfolk voluntary hub, sending referrals through for things like food, shopping collection, prescription collection, supporting those who were shielding. The way that customers are contacting us is very, very different. We’ve added two minutes to our call length.”***

Helen Beeson, Customer Contact Manager, Norwich City Council

***“Our agents are used more in an escalation capacity now and vendors are working the lower-value stuff. It means that on average, our agents actually spend more time working on tickets than they used to because they are more complex tasks and take longer to get to resolution.”***

Frontline manager, software

The changing nature of customer queries requires more training for frontline colleagues and increased support from other departments, to help deal with issues which the contact centre cannot resolve alone. In the short term, this puts pressure on capacity as more training means less hours available for shifts.

## Business not as usual – operating under lockdown

Thanks to cloud-based platforms many contact centres were able to maintain service at the onset of the first lockdown at the same time as switching to remote working. Inevitably wait times and handling times increased, as customer demand shot up while colleagues were adjusting to the new way of working.

***“It’s easy to resolve in the office. You can just ask someone. Whereas now there’s an extra step before you get to that person.”***

Frontline manager, retail

During lockdown, sickness and absence levels rose alongside the number of infections, requiring people to shield and putting further pressure on capacity.

***“To keep our workplace a Covid secure environment, we have a much lower on-site capacity with the majority of our employees working from home. However, for some individuals homeworking isn’t possible. As we have continued to recruit, we are continually balancing the availability of office space between new recruits with less experience and who need support and mentoring, and those that have a genuine need to work in the office, while maintaining a safe and secure environment.”***

Colette Evans, Head of Customer Service, United Utilities

***“One thing that we did was more cross training. In some of our contact centres we trained back-office staff to answer queries that they would not have handled before the pandemic.”***

Marco Brunetti, Contact Centre Performance Manager, Hoist Finance

As organisations worked to clarify policies and plans during the pandemic, customer updates have not always been quick or easy to obtain.

***“There’s a couple of things at the moment where you don’t necessarily know the correct answer and there’s a bit of a lag on some things, for example, updates stating what you can and can’t do and we may have already had 400 customers asking that one question.”***

Frontline manager, retail

***“There’s such high risk in the wrong information being provided, for example customers asking something as simple as ‘is this store open for a refund?’”***

Frontline manager, retail

The increasingly complex nature of customer queries means frontline teams need to rely more on help from other departments. But such help has not always been immediately available, as other departments have experienced their own capacity and resourcing challenges due to high demand and in many cases, depleted resources due to furlough.

***“We rely on third parties like solicitors and furloughed a number of staff for an extended period. So that put pressure on us having to look internally for other ways to get answers.”***

Frontline manager, financial services

***“If the call can’t be resolved at the first point of contact it has become more challenging to pass this over to other areas of the business that have been working more flexibly. Something that is very much on our radar is how do we allow more flexibility within the customer services team whilst meeting customer demand.”***

Shaun Taylor, Customer Lead, One Manchester

## Internal alignment is essential, but varies between organisations

More than ever, resolving customer queries requires effective collaboration between frontline teams and other parts of the organisation.

However, not all organisations have a well-established culture of collaboration. The extent to which this exists, and the experience of frontline teams, is highly correlated to the organisation's overall customer focus.

### Low customer centricity

- Internal silos create difficulties in resolving customer queries.
- Outdated technology and processes lead to inefficiencies that damage both customer and the colleague experience.
- Other departments lack empathy for customers and frontline colleagues.



### High customer centricity

- The contact centre is closely connected to other teams.
- Technology and processes are optimised for frontline colleagues to solve customer problems.
- Strong culture across all departments of supporting the front line.

***“Some colleagues have their own opinion of what the customer should be feeling and thinking. They don't understand why the customer is so angry. And you're caught in the middle. It's natural for me to listen to the customer but it frustrates me why colleagues can't just listen.”***

Frontline manager, housing association

***“Organisations try to pretend they know what customers want, when actually what they're saying is, this is what we want a customer to want.”***

Frontline manager, utility

***“I would go to the repairs team and say, ‘Look, this is the issue we have’. They asked me ‘what are you going to do about it? Have you liaised with the contractors?’ But the contractors report to you! They don't report to me.”***

Frontline manager, housing association

***“If a customer is contacting us about a refund, there's a kind of blame [that comes with that].”***

Frontline manager, property

Resourceful advisors and managers find ways to sidestep organisational barriers by forging personal relationships with peers in other departments. But this doesn't solve the underlying issues. The onus is on contact centre leaders to build formal connections and maintain awareness of the importance of being responsive to the contact centre, and therefore to customers.

***“When we do get something wrong, we try to explain, you know, all the different ways we could have intervened. And it always comes back to: does anyone sit back and say actually, there's a customer at the end of this? What does that look like? What does that feel like?”***

Frontline manager, utility

***“I have had to have a few conversations with other departments around respect and understanding.”***

Frontline manager, utility

Being the frontline there is a sense of urgency in the contact centre that naturally surpasses that elsewhere in the organisation. The gap has been further exacerbated during lockdown, as most

contact centres have remained open and fully staffed while other teams have been downsized and colleagues furloughed.

***“I might tell [my team] one thing in the morning, and by two o'clock, I'm telling them something different. Finance on the other hand, very archaic. They still do things by writing on a bit of paper. We're telling them you need to look at the bigger picture.”***

Frontline manager, property

***“The rest of the business can quite easily be like, right, you know what, I'm going to close my laptop, and take a few moments – but it's not like that in the contact centre. We can't just have everyone close their laptop, because we still need to answer calls and respond to emails – our world can't stop – we have to keep going.”***

Michael Rowland, Contact Centre Manager,  
AXA Global Healthcare

***“As a business we do a Monday morning webinar, led by a different director or a different part of the business. Monday is our busiest day. There's no way we can let the team watch the webinar or close the contact centre, of course. So, they always have to watch that on repeat.”***

Frontline manager, housing association

Frustrations can emerge when contact centre advisors perceive colleagues in other parts of the organisation to be unsympathetic or unhelpful. It falls to leaders to build connections and encourage empathy for the front line.

## Software tools help with collaboration, but require managerial resource

While lockdown and remote working have been challenging in many ways, one of the clear positives from the experience has been the rise of online platforms that have aided sharing and connectivity not only within contact centres but to and from other departments. Microsoft Teams has become a pre-eminent platform in many organisations, while Slack is popular with some technology-orientated organisations. Informal WhatsApp and Facebook groups have become a substitute for the office water-cooler.

The use of such platforms has helped to break down barriers and improve the availability of and responsiveness from other teams.

***“We have a page set up on Teams with people from head office, all the managers around the other areas, and ourselves. We'll put something on there – customer X has got an issue, this is the order number and case ID, can you offer some advice?”***

***And then they will come back and then it's a flowing conversation that helps us get back to that customer in an efficient way.”***

Frontline manager, retail

***“Emails are more formal...around changes, projects, or programs of a more formal nature. Teams is the chat you have over your desk or the mechanism people are using to chase if you're not quick enough to respond to your emails.”***

Amy Anderson, Contact Centre Manager,  
Echo Managed Services

***“It has improved the productivity of the managers, because now they have a tool that connects them to everybody. Everyone is more responsive. The challenge was to find solutions to help agents feel they are not home alone.”***

Marco Brunetti, Contact Centre Performance Manager,  
Hoist Finance

**“Because pretty much everyone is at home, we can get responses much quicker. And we’ve set ourselves up now where we’ve got access to decision makers so we can get decisions much quicker. Things have actually got easier.”**

Rachelle Elliott, Call Centre Manager, National Trust

**“We had the tools already in place for remote working, but it was very challenging when the pool of people working remotely grew. The tools which allow people to ask questions were filled to the brim and for the supervisors who were trying to keep up and help support the agents, it became a very, very big task. We had to hire more people to help support the remote workforce.”**

Charlotte Solberger, Director Telephone Operations, Ipsos MORI

While tools such as Teams have proven invaluable particularly in connecting contact centres to other colleagues, the proliferation of internal channels and communication volume has added to the workload of supervisors.

**“No one’s stopped using email and just moved to Teams – they use both. We duplicated our inflow of requests especially for managers, because if you can’t get a quick response on email you go to Teams.”**

Frontline manager, financial services

## Greater onus on people managers

These additional responsibilities required of team managers come at a time when they are already bearing significant additional pressures managing remotely and dealing with the emotional toll of the pandemic.

**never worked like this before and have the same personal pressures at times.”**

Frontline manager, financial services

**“The Centre Manager, Team Managers and I have a responsibility for how our people are feeling and we strive to have a great culture where our people feel motivated, engaged and developed. We felt this responsibility anyway but it feels greater now they aren’t in front of us physically but instead on a screen.”**

Nikki Lidster, SME Operations Manager, Zurich Insurance

**“We typically see a two-week delay between the agents and then the managers start to go through that emotional experience.”**

Amy Anderson, Contact Centre Manager, Echo Managed Services

**“You’re expecting managers to do training, development, all of the normal management BAU, and then also have a massive role to play in someone’s mental health and support and that’s very, very stressful at that level when they have**

**Leaders have to stand up and deliver messages, but we are not immune to this either. There is pressure on senior staff to put on a brave face, more than ever.”**

Charlotte Solberger, Director Telephone Operations, Ipsos MORI

**“We had to do an employment consultation with all of our consultation meetings done over Teams. Normally that’s a face-to-face meeting with**

*individuals where you can see the whites of their eyes, but with people being at home, it wasn't always conducive for them to have their cameras on. It's so hard to have difficult conversations with people with no video."*

Mark Porter, Head of Contact Services,  
The Ticket Factory

Managers who have received specific leadership training cite the benefits that such training brings to the job.

***"We went through a training course about two years ago. Newer team leaders that haven't been***

## The problem with legacy

Adding to the stresses of operating under lockdown, outdated systems are a reality for some. The most advanced contact centres can now boast cloud-based platforms and omni-channel capabilities, but at the other end of the spectrum there are still operations that have received little investment, are solely telephony based and are still functioning with inefficient manual workflows and little to no CRM visibility for advisors.

Not surprisingly such operations are challenging environments for colleagues and customers alike.

***"When people send email, we have to read all of those emails to see which department it goes to. I've got a lady who reads hundreds of emails every day and she'll know straight away it goes to that department. We've been looking at a new workflow so that it actually goes straight to the department and we wouldn't have to touch it. They've been talking about it for three years."***

Frontline manager, housing association

***"A customer had some work booked. The customer's ringing in saying 'I haven't heard anything, what's going on'. And my advisors might struggle. They have to call the customer back once they have found out from colleagues what's going on."***

Frontline manager, housing association

***through it don't have the same sort of skill set that we learned from that training. It's not been revisited since we did it, but it should be something that's available for anyone who's becoming a team leader."***

Frontline manager, telecom

In the near term and during a capacity crunch it may be difficult to accommodate the downtime required for leadership training. There can be no doubt though that such training is needed more than ever for managers whose responsibilities have evolved tremendously in a short period of time.

***"In three years we've used three different systems. Things have gone wrong and were launched before they should have. Customers haven't been transferred and things haven't been ticketed, and the team leader has to pick it up."***

Frontline manager, telecom

Decision-making cycles for platform upgrades are lengthy. Years can elapse between identifying a need and going live, by which time the environment has changed. It is the responsibility of contact centre leaders to anticipate these needs as far in advance as possible, then make the business case for investments to happen. With many organisations being especially cost-conscious at present, that is rarely a straightforward process.

***"It always seems to be something that's discussed when we go on to all-hands calls and things like that, but I'm not sure that the people who are looking to fix that in the background know the reality of how that affects advisors, because they're not customer-facing."***

Frontline manager, housing association

***“Each proposal has to go to management for approval, then we have to use corporate IT resources even though we have our own in our team because they don’t want anything on their system that they can’t fix.”***

Frontline manager, housing association

***“When I write a business case, it’s my job to make sure the person I’m presenting to doesn’t have information overload. I often say to myself... if I can’t do it in two pages, it’s too long and I need to refine. My main focus is to always clearly articulate the pros and cons of doing something, or doing nothing and what the outcome is on either of those actions.”***

Michael Rowland, Contact Centre Manager,  
AXA Global Healthcare

A positive outcome of the pandemic for most organisations has been a renewed focus on customers and the contact centre. Visibility among senior leaders and decision-makers into the front line and customer pain points has improved. Investments in self-serve capabilities have been hugely accelerated in the past 12 months. Beyond this, senior leaders must prioritise initiatives that improve the frontline experience, overcome silos, and nurture an internal culture that supports frontline workers.

## Making change happen

From far-reaching departures, such as a shift to remote working or something more day-to-day such as a new rota, constant change is a reality of life in the contact centre.

Whether large or small, changes must be handled sensitively if they are to have the desired impact. Frontline managers and contact centre leaders unanimously stressed the importance of bringing colleagues on the journey. Communication which is mainly “top down” in nature can be frustrating for the front line – “bottom up” engagement is essential.

***“You have to take in the human element of change. People are not machines, they’re not there to do what you want. They have needs and wants and feelings. You must manage in a way that they understand the reasons behind. Get them involved, communicate to them and let them have a chance to add their views so you can understand their side.”***

Frontline manager, software

***“We need some sort of roundtable with a group of advisors or a group of team leaders who could then go out and communicate that back to their peer group. Sometimes there are emails and things***

***which drop into people’s inboxes that come from higher up. But people get so many emails. It’s really impersonal to just get a get an email from a manager that four or five levels above you that you don’t know.”***

Frontline manager, telecom

***“What we found has been really successful is listening sessions across the business. Our guys have been saying ‘we understand that you might not be able to fix all of this, but we want you to have it on your radar.’ This has been really insightful and the findings have been shared across the business.”***

Shaun Taylor, Customer Lead, One Manchester

***“It seems like things are left behind sometimes, or don’t come across to us as quickly as we would like them to. And we don’t see the reasoning behind that.”***

Frontline manager, telecom

***“You just get an email to say a new process has gone in. But they haven’t gone to the people that will be using the process.”***

Frontline manager, housing association

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***“Let them come up with some of the answers to things.”***

Frontline manager, financial services

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In larger contact centres careful consideration must be given to cascading announcements. News spreads quickly on the ground and even something relatively basic such as shift changes can elicit the wrong reactions when not communicated properly through the correct channels.

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***“Assume that as soon as you communicate, it's going to filter down and plan accordingly. You can't keep anything secret for long.”***

Frontline manager, software

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***“The difficult thing is people do hear things, and they feel like they wish they'd known a bit sooner. When you've got a hundred people to get to and a set amount of people who are having these conversations with people to make sure that the message is correct, then you do have to ask people not to tell others.”***

Frontline manager, retail

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***“We do a high-level communication early because as you cascade your information downwards, there's a higher chance that it will leak. Rather than waiting for it to leak and then people asking us what's going on, we want to be ahead of that. We give them the heads up, no specific details but make sure they know what's coming. Give details individually if needed.”***

Frontline manager, software

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In 2021 managing change is a fundamental part of the job description for contact centre management. They must be able to communicate and implement changes effectively within their teams, be constantly vigilant to the impact of change on colleagues and influence the organisation to prioritise changes large and small that benefit customers and the front line.

## Strategies for leading through change

In an era of constant change, contact centre leadership roles have never been more demanding, or as rewarding. The following is a summary of the most common challenges that arise when leading teams through change, along with suggested strategies to overcome.

Challenge	Strategy
<b>Customer expectations have increased.</b>	<b>Prepare frontline colleagues</b> with communication and one-to-one guidance.
<b>Growth in frontline managers' responsibilities and associated pressures.</b>	<b>Specialist leadership training</b> for frontline managers, with an emphasis on personal resilience and EQ.
<b>Advisors are unable to find the answers to customer queries.</b>	Topic-based <b>teams groups</b> where frontline staff can directly access other departments. Upgrade internal knowledge management systems and ensure advisors know who to contact for help internally.
<b>Colleagues don't feel included in decisions.</b>	<b>Listening sessions.</b> Cascade <b>communication</b> personally rather than by email wherever possible, giving high-level information well in advance and dealing with specifics one on one. Ensure colleague input is fed back to other parts of the organisation and showcase how such feedback has led to action.
<b>Difficulty of maintaining personal connections with colleagues remotely.</b>	Don't be afraid to <b>be human</b> . Showing some vulnerability will help build empathy. It's okay for people to say they're not feeling great or for managers to admit they don't have all the answers.
<b>Inefficient workflows lead to delays resolving customer issues.</b>	<b>Consider how technology can help</b> , such as call routing, digital workflows and CRM integrations.
<b>"Always on" culture and burnout.</b>	<b>Build in planned downtime</b> for teams – for team-building and communication.
<b>Problems getting cooperation from other parts of the organisation.</b>	<b>Hold other departments accountable.</b> Nurture relationships with peers elsewhere in the organisation – to promote a culture of collaboration and information-sharing.
<b>Outdated systems overdue for upgrade.</b>	<b>Capitalise on the opportunity.</b> Thanks to the pandemic senior decision-makers have never been more cognisant of the need to future-proof. There has never been a better time to put forward a business case for investment in the contact centre.

## About the CCMA

The CCMA is the longest established association representing the call centre industry in the UK. We support contact centre managers through providing opportunities to network; to openly share best practice and to increase their skills and knowledge through specialist training

Our aim is to offer timely and impartial advice to our members; to keep contact centre leaders in touch with changes in their industry; to provide credible benchmarking information and to help individuals maintain an awareness of the latest trends and developments

Our membership association is not for profit, and our board is made up of people who work full time in the industry in operational roles. We are run by our members for our members.

**For more information: [www.ccma.org.uk](http://www.ccma.org.uk) | [@CCMATalk](https://twitter.com/CCMATalk)**

## About RingCentral

We work with our customers to reimagine the world of business communications and collaboration. This relentless passion to innovate has made us the #1 cloud communications provider worldwide, and we don't plan on stopping there.

Combining the best in UCaaS and telecommunications, RingCentral Contact Centre meets the needs of modern businesses to embrace a future-fit technology stack, enable remote working, and exceed skyrocketing customer expectations.

**For more information, please visit [ringcentral.co.uk](http://ringcentral.co.uk) or call UK 0800-098-8136.**

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